

Theses of the PhD Dissertation

EMILY DICKINSON  
AND THE BYPASSES OF  
PUBLICATION

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## **I. Academic context, Topic and Objectives**

Emily Dickinson is one of the most reputed American poets today. Paradoxically, she avoided print publication, fame and public acknowledgement all her life. In the past decades a number of researchers have sought to determine the reasons for Dickinson's refusal to publish her poems in print. The dissertation seeks to contribute to the investigation of this issue while it also intends to clarify Dickinson's concept of publication and examine her bypasses which seem to aim at substituting the print reproduction of her poetry. The main objective of this study is to argue that it was Dickinson's intention to publish her poems by sharing their handwritten copies with readers, while she rejected print as a means of commercialized reproduction endangering the autonomy and the integrity of the texts.

Dickinson's attitude to publication is one of the most significant discussions since it is essential for the understanding of her philosophy of artistic reproduction and poetry. The considerable critical attention the problem received includes diverse approaches. Karen A. Dandurand in *Why Dickinson Did Not Publish* attempts to find an explanation for Dickinson's decision and focuses on the publication history of her poems during her lifetime and the unexploited opportunities to print her works, assuming that she could have published her poems but did not wish to. I share her view concerning her conclusion, however, I find it regrettable that she fails to examine Dickinson's substitutes for print.

Dickinson's manuscripts have also received considerable attention by scholars. Damnhall Mitchell in *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* analyses the limitations of print owing to which the poems could not have been represented as they appeared on the manuscript page, thus being the possible reasons for Dickinson's refusal to publish. At the same time, he claims that certain features of the manuscripts are accidental and warns against accepting that the layout of Dickinson's autographs is deliberate. I find that Dickinson seems to experiment with the visuality of her manuscript poems, although, even if this is not always the case, the point is not her intension but the way the visual image of the manuscripts influences the interpretation of the poems.

Fred D. White in *Approaching Emily Dickinson: Critical Currents and Cross Currents Since 1860* supposes that Dickinson sought wider recognition in 1862 and considered "printing", this is the reason why she approached Thomas Wentworth Higginson, although she later realized that conventional print publication would deprive her poems of "breathing". In White's view Dickinson sees publication as compromising the integrity of the poet for mercenary advantages. This seems to be the case concerning commercial distribution, however, Dickinson did not reject publication in the sense of sharing her work with the readers.

The manuscript scholars regard Dickinson's handwritten works, especially the fascicles as her alternative modes of publishing. However, in "Dickinson's Manuscripts" Martha Nell Smith argues that in the first eight fascicles Dickinson was writing

with the book or printed page in mind. In *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* Smith reconsiders the concept of publication and concludes that Dickinson's letters and fascicles are alternative forms of distribution which free Dickinson from the limitations of print reproduction. In my dissertation I extended this list to unbound sets, poems included or embedded in letters, letter-poems, gift poems and reciting poetry to friends or family members. I also attempted to explore the reasons for Dickinson's choice of chirographic publishing instead of print.

Another manuscript study, Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* discusses the poems in the context of the sequences of fascicles. Cameron tends to agree that Dickinson may have intended her home-made books for private publication. Similarly, Dorothy Huff Oberhaus examining Fascicle 40 as a sequence of poems in the context of Biblical themes in *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning* considers the fascicles a form of self-publication. Eleanor Elson Heginbotham in *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibilities* studies the fascicles as Dickinson's own context and focuses on the poems repeated in more than one fascicle. She expresses her admiration for Dickinson's editorial skills manifested in her hand-written books. Although I discuss the fascicles only as Dickinson's alternatives to print publication, I found the above works crucial for my research, as viewing the manuscript books as contexts or sequences implies that they represent a form of private publication. This concept is

challenged by R.W. Franklin, who presumes that Dickinson created the fascicles in order to keep track of her poems.

An important issue that I treated was the visuality of Dickinson's work. I agree with McGann's argument that the visuality of Dickinson's manuscript page plays a special role in her work. Dickinson's turning the autograph poems into artifacts is also discussed in the dissertation. In Jeanne Holland's view, similarly to the fascicles, the scraps and cutouts are the results of Dickinson's private publishing activity. In "Stamps, Scraps and Cutouts: Emily Dickinson's Domestic Technologies of Publication", Holland argues that these are not drafts but new experimental genres, visual artifacts. It seems that at the beginning Dickinson may have wished to follow the stages of a traditional writing career, but later as she found her own voice and became aware of the irregular features of her poetry, she discovered new ways of experimenting with the text on the handwritten page and its visual potentials. Dickinson's poetry is characterized by irregularities, including her unconventional punctuation, for example her dashes, which result in multiple readings. In *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* Paul Crumbley emphasizes the added value of the different effects the manuscripts make as opposed to the print reproduction of Dickinson's work. Besides Crumbley and Smith, Sharon Cameron represents similar views concerning the importance of the autograph versions of the poems.

I found studies treating the instability of the genre of the poems also important for my research as I believe that this is one of

the factors which contributes to the print resistant nature of the poems. Print resistance is closely linked to genre resistance. As Virginia Jackson asserts in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* the modern concept of lyric needs reconsideration in connection with Dickinson's poems, which resist classification as lyric. Alexandra Socarides in *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Genre* concentrates on the fascicles when she writes about Dickinson's experiments with the limits of genre, while rethinking the presumptions about the genres employed in them. Indeed, the same poem may appear as an individual poem, as part of a collection or sequence, as a letter-poem, as part of a prose letter embedded in it or attached to it or as an artifact: the manuscript copy of a poem occasionally accompanied by a gift. The change of addressee may result in a shift of genre.

The problem of publication or non-publication involves Dickinson's attitude to the public. Given the fact that she almost never submitted her poems to print publication, her awareness and her need of the audience had to be given special attention. As I asserted, Dickinson's expectations of the readers forecast the theory of reader response criticism. In *Dickinson and Audience* the editors, Martin Orczek and Robert Weisbuch collected essays discussing Dickinson's intended readers, her ideal reader, and her relationship to the wider public. David Porter's "Dickinson's Unrevised Poems" elaborates the irregularities and the incompleteness of the texts. These features hinder the readers' understanding of the poems and necessitate different readerly strategies. In the same volume Robert

Weisbuch's "Nobody's Business: Dickinson's Dissolving Audience" speaks of the active participation Dickinson demands of her readers and the challenges they face due to her elliptical language.

The dissertation makes a distinction between print and the other forms of publication, that is the non-print distribution of Dickinson's work. Print could have limited the scope of interpretation of the poems as in Dickinson's time the technology available could not have represented every aspect of her work as it appeared on the manuscript page, including the chirographic and visual features. Besides their visuality, Dickinson's poems are characterized by certain qualities which make them withstand print publication, such as their dynamic, unfinished nature, the ambiguity and multiplicity attached not only to the text including variant elements but also to the genre of the poems. Dickinson may have been aware of the above-mentioned print resistant features of her poetry, which could have contributed to her refusal of print technology. Her alternative ways of publishing involve her manuscript collections, the fascicles, which she produced from about 1858 to 1864. During this period she gathered her poems in forty groups and bound them together with a string to form booklets. After 1864 until the 1870s Dickinson's attempts at self-publishing are represented by the sets, which were written, similarly to the fascicles, on letter paper but were unbound. There is, however, no evidence that these home-made collections were meant for the public, while in several cases Dickinson prepared copies of individual poems for one or sometimes more readers. The

dissertation demonstrates that Dickinson intended to share her work not only with the future generations but also with the contemporary public, including her family members, friends and acquaintances and the selected few that are ready to meet the challenge of creative reading and co-authoring demanded by her enigmatic, metaphorical and irregular language.



## **II. Approach and Method**

My research method works centered, based on the textual evidence of the poems. Although my assumptions concerning Dickinson's intentions are speculative similarly to those of other researchers, I attempted to find Dickinson's ideas in her own texts with the traditional method of close reading, while accepting and extending more recent, postmodern views of Dickinson criticism on the materiality and visuality of Dickinson's poems, their existence as artifacts, their unfinished character as well as the instability of genres in Dickinson's oeuvre. However, instead of following one particular trend of criticism, I aimed at integrating and synthesizing the various scholarly approaches regarding the central problem treated in my work. Relying on the context of her poems I tried to detect the clues to the understanding of her attitude to publication and the issues related to this problem. All the arguments and observations I made are based on the implicit evidence of the poems.

Each of the main issues I identified as worth considering in connection with the subject of the dissertation constitutes a chapter. Thus the overall structure of the dissertation takes the form of six chapters excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion.

### **III. Achievements**

In my dissertation I attempted to explore the aspects of Emily Dickinson's concept of publication, the reasons for her avoidance of print reproduction and her substitutes for the latter. Besides synthesizing and extending the findings of the research concerning Dickinson's approach to publication, providing my own readings, I looked anew at Dickinson's views hidden in the poems.

Chapter I treats Dickinson's attitude to poetic vocation as an unpublished poet. While her forming inclination was intertwined with the feeling of shame resulting from her idea of poetry as an unwomanly and rebellious activity, her poems from the early 1860's attest that she proudly declared poetry to be her profession and expressed her satisfaction over her choice. I found that Dickinson's dedication to poetry was rooted in the conviction that she was elected for the divine occupation of poet, which she expressed with the metaphors of rank, title, royalty, divinity and the color white. She regarded poets as mediators between God and human beings and saw poetic inspiration as deriving from God.

Chapter II examines Dickinson's highly professional poetic method and writing technique as well as her notion of poetry and the role of poet. I assume that her method was characterized by circumferential expression and "slant telling", as she wrote in poem 1263. Examining her poems on the process of writing, I found that the poetic activity she described included selection, reproduction,

mimesis, distillation, condensation and transformation. Her *ars poetica* reveals that she aimed at communicating the truth, that of God and that of nature, as a service to mankind.

Chapter III undertakes to scrutinize Dickinson's approach to public recognition and fame, which is a significant issue as Dickinson's refusal of publication implies her renunciation of public acclaim. The poems analyzed in this chapter expose her disinterest in immediate success, which she considered transitory and consequently valueless. This chapter demonstrates that Dickinson rejected the appreciation of the contemporary audience as she targeted posterity and the deferred reward of immortality instead of fast, time-bound success.

Chapter IV is concerned with Dickinson's attitude to readers. By refusing the traditional print circulation of the poems, she also rejected the public reached by the print publications of her time. I argued that Dickinson was not interested in public recognition during her lifetime. Yet, she was aware that she needed readers just as readers needed her poetry. She hoped for the immortality of her poems, thus she intended her poetry for future generations together with a restricted group of understanding contemporary readers who could meet her requirements and appreciated her condensed, circumferential and cryptic expression. She challenged them with her intentional irregularities and barriers to interpretation, and expected their active participation in the process of creation as co-authors of the poems. Those who were not able to satisfy the above

expectations appear to have been excluded from the circle of Dickinson's desired audience.

Chapter V asserts that the poems resist print publication due to their unfinished, unfixed, dynamic nature, their visual elements, the lack of titles, the co-existence of the variants and the fluidity of genres. Dickinson was conscious of her art and she was aware of the unique features of her poetry. Consequently, she refused to preserve and stabilize a final, static and permanent form of the poems in print. Although some visual characteristics of the autographs are unintentional, still, regardless of Dickinson's intentions, her calligraphic handwriting and the visual features of the manuscript pages which would have been difficult or impossible to translate into print in the nineteenth century exert considerable influence on the interpretation of the poems.

Chapter VI discusses Dickinson's idea of print as a means of the commercialization of literature. She refused to alter her poems to satisfy editorial expectations and the market demand. She wished to maintain control over her poems, not only as an author but also as an editor, publisher, bookbinder, and a marketing specialist who selected the target group she intended to write for. Dickinson sought out alternative ways to make her art known to her public. The forms of chirographic publication included her handmade books, the fascicles and the unbound collections, the sets, the private circulation of poems embedded or enclosed in letters, letter-poems, and gift copies of poems. The private sharing of letters and Dickinson's habit of occasionally reading out her work to her family or visitors also

contributed to the distribution of her poems to a widening circle of readers.

Having scrutinized Dickinson's concept of publication through her poetry in my dissertation, I concluded that her choice of publishing media was based on the handwritten page. We should allow for the supposition that she might have had the idea of traditional print publishing in mind at the beginning of her career, however, later she definitely refused to print. I do not believe that she had to renounce of publication because of the lack of encouragement, appreciation or opportunities. She could have printed her work if she intended to.

Nevertheless, Dickinson wished to publish her work and she did so, in manuscript form. Her refutation of the commercialization of literature coupled with her female reticence and the poems' resistance to print may have contributed to her decision as much as her fear of a non-understanding audience and her fear of success and the resulting fame, publicity and the loss of her privacy.

Emily Dickinson was a professional poet committed to her vocation. She was convinced that poets were elected for their divine occupation as communicators of God's truth. Thus she created a non-print publishing scene for her poetry. Consequently, she was neither an unknown nor an unpublished poet during her lifetime, she only used different publishing media to represent her work. Her choice of the bypasses of publication implied neither renunciation nor compromise, much rather the revision and reinvention of the manuscript culture behind her times, which resulted in the synergy of

the old and the new as well as that of the private and the public sphere.

#### IV. Relevant Publications

“Emily Dickinson’s Pseudo Silence.” *Reverberations of Silence: Silenced Texts, Sub-Texts and Authors in Literature, Language and Translation*. Eds. Márta Pellérdi and Gabriella Reuss. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 76-95. Print.

“Tricks of the Trade: Emily Dickinson on Writing Poetry.” *HUSSE10-LitCult: Proceedings of the HUSSE10 Conference: Literature & Culture volume*. Eds. Kinga Földváry, Zsolt Almási and Schandl Veronika. Debrecen: Hungarian Society for the Study of English, 2011. 53-60. Web.

“Emily Dickinson on Words and the Word of God: The Influence of Religion on Emily Dickinson's Poetry.” *Nyelvilág* 10 (2010): 47-52. Print.

“The Recluse and the Activist, or Opposites Attract: Brenda Wineapple, White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 2008).” *Anachronist* 14 (2009): 198-201. Print.

“A vallás és a Biblia hatása Emily Dickinson költészetére.” *Nyelvilág* 8 (2009): 65-68. Print.

“Volt-e élet az email előtt? Emily Dickinson levelei az ókori és középkori levélírás tükrében.” *BGF Tudományos Évkönyv 2007: Reformok útján.* Ed. Pál Majoros. Budapest: Budapesti Gazdasági Főiskola, 2007. 397-405. Print.